TRAVELS OF A TREE: SOUTHWEST TAI BORROWING OF A BIOTERM -- FROM CHAM TO SHAN

John Hartmann
Northern Illinois University

In a previous paper (Hartmann 1996a), the author demonstrated, mostly through Central Thai (Siamese) classical literature, how heavily the Thai (including the Northeastern Thai and the Lao) have borrowed a large part of their lexicon for naming bioforms from Khmer. In a subsequent study of a Tai Dam foundation myth, it was discovered that the name of the narrative's hero was that of the stately tree whose Latin name is *dipterocarpus tuberculatus*. The same tree name appears in the foundation myth of the Shan, or Tai-Yai, of Saen Wi, Burma, where it is also associated with their founding hero. Likewise, a myth associated with the foundation of Vientiane, Laos, has a hero of the same name.

Complicating matters, however, is the occurrence of several varieties of *dipterocarpus* and variations in local Southwestern Tai names as well. Differences may be explained on both biological and linguistic grounds. One of the names, *k* [proto-Tai tone A1], found in Northeastern Thai (Isan), Lao of Vientiane and Luang Prabang, can be traced back to Khmer and, even one step further removed, to Cham. The genesis of other names, which seem to have two or three underlying forms, is more problematic.

In this paper, the author will present a dialect map of the *dipterocarpus* in the Southwestern Tai domain tracing the path of borrowing — the "travels of a tree" — from Cham into Khmer, Lao, and Northeastern Thai and the geographic distribution of other terms for *dipterocarpus*. In addition, there will be a discussion of the symbolic power of the bioform in cultural and literary terms and a transliteration and translation of portions of the Shan version of the legend of the tree prince, Khun Teung, to illustrate how comparative linguistics and literature can reinforce each other.

Introduction

For the past several years, I have been putting together the pieces of a project that deals with two different versions of an underlying *Ur-text* of a type of founding hero, who is called "Prince Terng" [นุ่น ทิ่ง] by the Tai Dam (Black Tai) of Northwest Vietnam and "Prince Theung" [นุ่น ทิ่ง] in Laos and Northeast Thailand. The slight dialect difference in the names
reflects both close similarities and dramatic differences in language (including writing systems), religion (Buddhism vs. animism), and other aspects of their cultures. A third version of the tale of the heroic prince — in Shan called Khun Teung Kham [KHUN TEUNG KHAM] "Prince Golden Dipterocarpus"— that was the most recent to turn up is found among the Shan of Saen Wii, Burma. Banchop (1975) summarizes the story in the passage below. A segment of the story as it is told in the original Shan of Saen Wii appears directly following the summary.

Shan Legends

When we come to that part that deals with this type of history [i.e., legends], if we would pass over them without any interest in them, we would miss several really interesting stories. So I asked permission of the Jao Fa [local ruling prince] to copy down Shan legends that his officials had just collected and written down in notebooks that I would then study with elder teachers. The language used is difficult because, besides its being a literary language, it is also in an old dialect that has many words that even the teachers themselves could not explain the exact meaning of. Still one obtains stories that are fun to read.

Of those that are amusing, it is, I would say, because - no matter which legends of which group - they usually begin with supernatural powers of the Shan, such as the previously mentioned Khun Lu, Khun Lai climbing down stairs from heaven to rule the kingdoms of humans, for example. And when they reach the earth, they usually cannot escape tales of a human male cohabiting with a female serpent. The Shan legend that I have taken to study is said to be indigenous with Saen Wii. It is of the same type that begins with "Yaam Nan," that is, "At that time," in the Kingdom of the Tai-Mau in the district of Ban Jetong [bān cē tōn], there was an old man and woman who had a big banana grove that was next to a pond that bordered the River Mau. The name of the place was Saen Wii because the bananas of the old man and woman came forth by the thousands. The old couple had a son whose name was Khun [Prince] Aay. Khun Aay had a special quality, namely the ability to sing well and in a "cooling" style. Whenever he was free from work, he would usually sit and sing at the edge of the pond. It so
happened that a Naga princess named Bapphawati heard him, and this made her fall in love with Khun Aay. So she transformed herself into a beautiful, young woman. They made love, and then the Naga princess led him down into her world and there fixed up a golden palace for him in Nagaland. Her father and the entire retinue of nagas transformed themselves into human shapes so as not to frighten Khun Aay. But he eventually knew what was going on, and so he devised the strategy of going home to visit his parents. The naga princess was forced to let him go. But she requested that Khun Aay raise the child that she would give birth to as an egg at the edge of the pond near the house of Khun Aay. He kept his word. (When he found the egg), he used his finger to poke a hole in the egg. He put his finger in the mouth of the infant to suck on. Milk then flowed out from the finger miraculously. And because the infant was born at the edge of a pond whose waters were "still," he was called "Teung" [ทิ้ง).

Or it might be because the old couple found the egg at the waters' edge they feared was dangerous, and so they took a leaf of the teung tree [ต้อง ตูง] and enclosed him in it. Khun Aay therefore named him "Khun Teung Kham" [Prince Golden Dipterocarpus] began a line of descendants from a naga princess.

A Shan—Saen Wi Version of Tale of Prince Teung: Thai Transliteration and English Translation

(กอตตะมา)

ราย หลัง เจ้าโคตมุ พระ เจ้า
time later  lord Kotama the lord
Later, the Lord Kotama

เข้า / เมืองไทย เมือง หมาก /
enter country
Entered the world

ปรินิปัน (นิยมาน) ขันโคม (ขันต่อมุก ถี้ / ศาสนำ)
Nirvana  Nirvana / religion
of Nirvana.

ปี เมือง นับได้ 1274 ปี ขึ้นราช
year country count can 1274 year B.E.
It was the year 1274 B.E.

92 ปี (เกลียว ปลาย สอง)
92 year
Ninety-two years later.
there was in the Kingdom of the Tai-Mau a village named Jetong. In the village of Jetong, still have grandparents husband wife live follow/around that. They tended a big banana grove. Thus made orchard banana big. The two of them eventually had a son who knew how to sing soothing songs. Some days he might go to make song follow below/down river mau that every day. One day, a naga princess named...
Papphaudi that then go up come play/swim
Papphaudi came to swim
visit country people come play/swim stay in water/river
and visit the world of people; she came to swim in the River

mua that and then hear sound
Mau and then she hear the sound of

make music post-verb orchard banana that
someone singing a song in the banana grove.

lady naga hear to be touch hear sweet
What the naga princess heard touched her by its sweetness.

heart ? (build?) ? (tempt/agitate/gather into a pile?) make
body naga go
The naga coiled her body and

go up stay at edge it ? (afraid?) ? (tempt/agitate/pile up?)
went up to stay at the water’s edge.

pile up grab neg?/surprise? hear sound/voice
She coiled up in surprise at hearing the sound

make song it side naga then
of someone singing a song. The naga princess then

change (change) body press out body/shape fish gold come
transformed her body into the shape of a golden fish

swim/play stay follow/around rock drive/royal palace?
and swim among the rocks.

time that prince ?aay got to/past see (fish)
Then Prince Aay saw the fish
The two talked and asked each other questions.
The naga princess then changed her form
into that of a shapely young woman. The two of them then
made love together complete princess naga
made love together. The naga princess
then take son grandfather orchard banana prince
then invited the son of the old banana farmer. Prince
Aay, to be led into the world of the nagas.

[The following jumps ahead to the original fieldnotes, page 18, line 1: The naga princess produces an egg]
He removed the leaves around the egg of the naga princess.

He then take care of it

then grab take big leaf theung cover

for later use see and go search/peek go every day

His mother secretly followed him to look at it and then saw the place.

Prince Aay went to sit there; his father got up and went there.

His mother then went to take a look.

She saw the egg of the naga princess and knew

to be egg lady naga? (know?) that like this

One day, his elderly mother

then said that she would have him go take the egg and keep it
Significance of the Names Teung (Shan), Theung (Lao), & Terng (Tai Dam)

In a recent paper on bioforms and biophilia in the Thai (Siamese) poem "Samuttakote Kham Chan," I showed how Thai poets exploit names of plants and other life forms in their poetry to create sensual and spiritual
experiences. This, I claim, is because of their closeness to and affinity for the mysteries of nature and its effect on the imagination and sense of wonder. Particularly in the Lao version of the tale of "Prince Dipterocarpus," the son is emblematic of these biophilia tendencies; he is no less than naga-tree, having been born of a serpent mother (Nang Aek Khay) and having experienced post-partum affinities—namely, being tied up to the tree in a kind of symbolic grafting—to one of the great trees of Southeast Asia, the teung~theung~terng tree. Sharp (1994:22) puts it dramatically.

The tallest tree are the emergents, so called because they pop up or emerge even above the general level of the canopy. But the most celebrated tree family forming the canopy in lowland tropical rain forest, with the cauliflower-like crowns, is the straight-trunked dipterocarps (Dipterocarpaceae), most of them valuable hardwoods sought by the timber industry....Dipterocarps may attain heights of over 70 meters and build trunk diameters of over 2 meters....Many of these trees take 70-100 years to reach full height, which is one of the reasons it is so hard to reforest economically with dipterocarps.

It would be my guess that most of the giant dipterocarps have been cut down in Thailand and that many of younger Thais would not have seen one, except a "museum pieces" on temple grounds where they are protected. This loss is but one in a series of extinction of human experience for the citizen of Southeast Asia and the world as well. An American tree that is a good parallel of the Southeast Asian dipterocarp is the giant Sequoia or Redwood, which reaches a height of 100 meters. Like the teung tree, the Sequoia also has the name of a great leader, the Cherokee Indian chief Sequoyah, who invented the Cherokee syllabary for writing his language.

A Linguistic Geography of the Teung Tree: Dipterocarpus tuberculatus

According to McFarland (1944:572), the teung tree is called พลUbuntu /phluan/ in Korat and Kamphaengphet, กำหนด /khuang/ in Pitsanulok, Центральный ประเทศไทย.

In a book titled L’Habitation Lao that deals with Lao architecture in Luang Prabang and Vientiane, at least three distinct kinds of dipterocarpus are distinguished in terms of their taxonomy, also expressed in terms of qualities of the wood used in construction. (N.B. Alternate names are listed below the common name.)11 Conspicuously absent from the list, however, is the Lao name ทอง for the dipterocarpus variety after whom the prince is named. One possibility is that the ทอง variety is not used in Lao household construction, which is what the list is all about.

1. kung
ekoung Dipterocarpus tuberculatus ROXB. A commercial wood used for general construction and easy to work. It has a resin that has several uses.

2. śaad

sat Dipterocarpus obtusifolius TEYSM. Used for general construction. Dries well but has a tendency to crack.

3. ńaang

nhang, nhang’khaow, nhang mouak Dipterocarpus alatus ROXB. Also Dipterocarpus obtusifolius GAERTN nhang done, nhang dèng Dipterocarpus dyeri P.
Judging from the above, ดี๋ tense in northern Laos (with some overlap in Central Laos and Isan [Northeast] Thailand ที่นี้), northern Thailand and the Saen Wai Shan area of northeast Burma is the closest in form to ที่นี้ tense, the Tai Dam form of the name. The Central Thai name of the tree is น้ำผึ้ง phluan or ยำผึ้ง yaŋphluan and appears to be identical with the third Lao category above: นำang.12 The variant forms of น้ำ kūŋ used in Isan Thailand by ethnic Lao and Khmer indicates that the Khmer form Daəm khloŋ is the immediate source of borrowing.13 (See map.)

However, to make linguistic matters even more complex and interesting, the Khmer borrowed the name from the Cham, the language of an Austronesian group of long prior residence in Vietnam and Cambodia but now nearly extinct as a consequence of wars. The Khmer spelled form klūŋ is pronounced khloŋ. It is borrowed into Khmer from Cham kalauŋ (au is a diphthong; the spelled form is kalōŋ), which became Khmer kalōŋ > klūŋ, and finally Lao kluŋ > kūŋ.14

What can be concluded from this mix of names for the dipterocarpus tree and its relationship to the narrative of a Tai foundation hero who carries one of these tree names and attendant symbolic value?

First, we can conclude that the Central Thai form yaŋphluan is a biological twin or sibling of the Lao นำang. They are not relevant to the discussion of the names found in the Middle Mekong River Basin.15

Second, a south to north movement of one of the names of the tree upward along the Mekong corridor is clear: Cham kalauŋ became Khmer kalōŋ > klūŋ, which became, in turn, Lao kluŋ > kūŋ.

Third, and more problematic, are the variant forms for the name of the tree and tree hero in the upper reaches of the Middle Mekong: ทว/tu/təŋ. No rules of linguistic change come to mind that would help
to connect these three forms to kūn. There is a clear difference in linguistic shape that indicates a different dialect or a different variety of the tree, or possibly both. One other explanation is possible and bears looking into further. On the map, the citation shown at Chiang Mai is sat hô, which is actually Lawa, another Mon-Khmer language.16 We know that the Lawa were the predecessors of the Tai in this region and that the Lanna Tai borrowed a great deal of their culture as they took over the area. Then it is not improbable that the Tai in this more northerly region borrowed the Lawa name of the tree. Following the Tai tendency to reduce polysyllables to monosyllables when borrowing, Lawa sat hô could have led to the Lao/Tai variant forms: thuôn/tuôn/tôn. The name of the tree purportedly borrowed from the Lawa consequently became the name of the tree hero of the foundation myth common to the Shan, Tai Dam and Lao. The travels of this second name cluster and literary event is then from north to south along the Mekong cultural corridor. The suggested direction of borrowing of both sets of names of the dipterocarpus in two opposing directions—north to south; south to north—along the Middle Mekong River is shown on the map.

Conclusions

In this paper we have presented data from comparative linguistics and literature to demonstrate the connectivity of Tai language and culture along the corridor of the Middle Mekong River. In this particular instance, a tree, the dipterocarpus, and its geographic distribution was the object around which the pursuit for patterns centered. Environment and biology play an important part in the puzzle, which is far from solved. The linguistic map, based largely on dictionary entries from Thai sources, indicates that there are at least three names for the tree depending on location—and perhaps the particular species, a matter that requires further investigation. Two sets of local dialect names, tuôn and kūn cluster along the Middle Mekong
connecting what historically were the Lan Na and Lan Xang Tai kingdoms and spheres of cultural influence. The third nomenclature, yaan or yaanphluan, is basically Central Thai, i.e., Tai language away from the Mekong region.

The literary tradition of different versions of tales of the tree prince also suggests Lan Na—Lan Xang beginnings and southward movement along the Middle Mekong. In his study of traditional Lao literature, Peter Koret (1996: 101-126), for one, notes the common origin of Lao and Lanna (Tai Yuan) scripts and literatures. He aligns the textual traditions of both groups to "the close relationship between Lanna and Lan Xang, and the former's cultural influence on the latter."

The Tais are known to be riverine peoples. Praneet and Sujit Wongthes (1989:161-169) list four major groups as inhabitants of river basins. One of the four outlines the region that has been the focus of this essay: "The Mekong River Group, found in Sipsong Panna, in China's Yunnan province down to the northern part of Burma, Laos, and Thailand and the Northeast Region of Thailand." In their essay, the scholars list numerous common cultural practices, mostly in the performance and literary arts that have a geographical, i.e., environmental, basis. In his work on Lao literature, principally his translation of the classic Phra Lek Phra Lam, Sahai (1989) similarly presents in exquisite detail the role that the Middle Mekong and its bountiful environment plays in informing the epic.

What began as a seemingly straightforward investigation into the history of the name of a Tai founder figure associated with a certain kind of tree turned out to be much more complicated than anticipated. When linguistics meets Linnaeus, much is demanded of the latter as the list of dipterocarpus increases and the mapping of dialect nomenclatures onto them blurs. And with this first foray into a forest of tree names, we can scarcely claim to be "out of the woods" yet.
After the body of this paper was written, still another variety of the *dipterocarpus* was found in a dictionary of Khmer-Surin in northeastern Thailand (Chantrupanth: 561). There, it is *dipterocarpus intricatus*, defined in English as 'a kind of big tree'. The Khmer word is *khlɔŋ*, and defined in Central Thai as ‘máy hían’, the name of a large tree of the yaan type.’ However, the Latin term given for ‘máy hían’ in The *Royal Institute Thai Dictionary* is ‘*dipterocarpus obtusifolius*’ Teijsm. ex Miq.’ Here the Khmer-Surin name is clearly cognate with Lao-Isan *kun*, bringing us back to the point made at the outset: that one line of travel of this bioform was from Cham to Khmer and then into Lao and Isan-Thai, but not Central Thai.
Notes

3 khûn, according to Condominas (1990: 44, 104-105), is borrowed from jun, meaning 'sovereign, chief' and is a title that designated the chief, prince, or king of a chieng of fortified town and its surrounding villages, together called a mtuan.
4 Terweil (1983:45-46) states that the termok' naan originally denoted a lady of high rank. The power and status attached to these titles has been lost, as can be seen clearly in Central Thai. Khanittanan (1977) mentions that in Phu Thai thaaw5 and naang3 are used in combination with male and female names respectively as a sign of formality or politeness. In contrast to the Buddhist Thai-Isan, the Tai Dam do not have the notion of kam [kharma] in their belief system or language. Bun [merit] and bâap [demerit] are found, however.

5 The raising of the vowel from Tai Dam /ə/ to /u/ before the final -ng /ŋ/ is an instance of "nasal umlaut," in phonetic terms. It occurs in White Tai and other Tai languages as well.
9 See Ponsi Tharaphum (1991), who shows pictures of some of these "museum pieces."
10 The tree was named after the Indian chief, not the reverse.
11 There is an isogloss that cuts across the north of Thailand connecting Tak with Loey. North of this line, proto-Thai /*d-/ becomes /t/-, as in /tuŋ/ below the line, the correlate is /th/-, as in /thuŋ/. See Hartmann, J. 1984, Linguistic and Memory Structures in Tai-Lue Oral Narratives. (Pacific Linguistics, B-90) Canberra: Australian National University. p. 32.

Central Thai initial y- is pronounced ŋ- in Lao.


I am grateful to Ratreer Wayland for pointing this out to me.

A comment on one other aspect of the two trees is required, however. The Central Thai word yaŋ, which is congnate with ŋaŋ, can be translated as 'resin' or 'rubber'. Thus, in the booklet, *The History of Inthakhin Post*, it is pointed out in a footnote I (p. 47), "Ton Yang Luang ('tree/resin/big') [the tree to the east of the Inthakhin shrine] is a kind of dipterocarpus yielding resin, which is commonly used for several purposes in early times." The booklet also recalls that the area of Chiangmai was once a forest of dipterocarpus. At the same time, the tree kuŋ also yields a resin that has several uses according to Clément-Charpentier (1990). See fn. 12 above. What is important to identify for the sake of identifying the tree of the myth is the dipterocarpus with the large leaf, the wrapping used to protect the infant prince.

If not borrowed from Lawa, perhaps another language in northwestern Mon-Khmer or a Mon language in the region.

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